

Nocturnal Visions



IN CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

By darkening the soul one is enlightened.

—ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

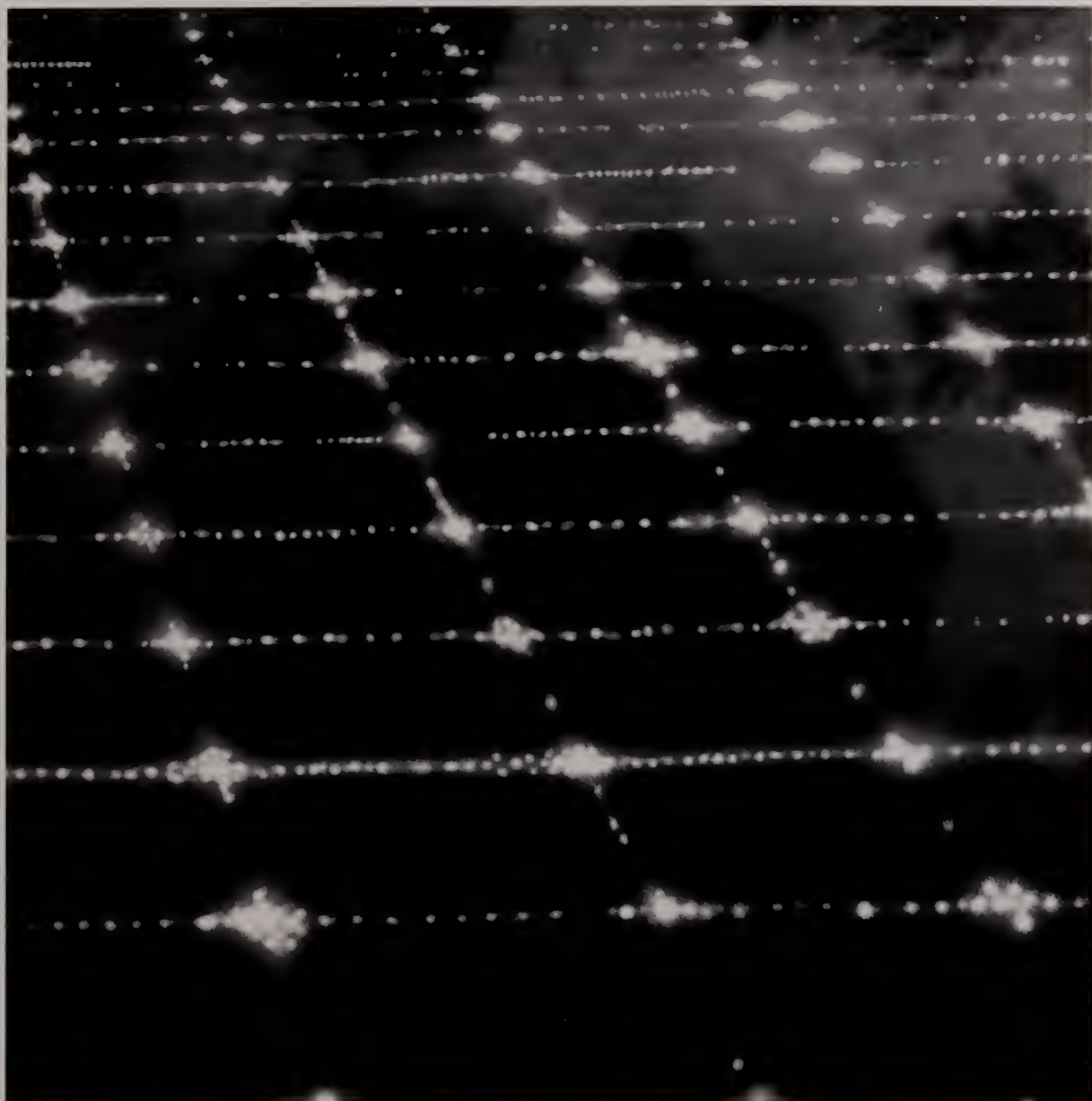
Many contemporary artists are rejecting the trends of the last three decades that focused on the conceptualization and deconstruction of the art object and often subsumed it in rhetoric, the media, and the marketplace. Instead, they are evoking earlier aesthetic traditions. In an effort to restore the magic of art, these painters are looking back to the nocturne, that sublime order of the nineteenth-century Romantic landscape, and redefining it in a contemporary context. By focusing on the nocturne, they can present enigmatic terrains where mood overwhelms realism. Through the veil of night, hard edges are blurred and the crepuscular images of Romanticism once again emerge.

In the early nineteenth century, as Europe became immersed in Romanticism, the nocturne first surfaced as an important theme in landscape painting. Nocturnes became vehicles for the spiritualization of nature, for transcending the boundaries of the physical world. In America, Romanticism was also a seminal force in establishing a tradition of landscape painting. From 1825 to about 1875, the Hudson River School, founded by Thomas Cole, synthesized the Romantic viewpoint with nationalistic pride in America's scenic grandeur as artists portrayed their own primordial wilderness with naturalism and drama. But it was James Abbott McNeill Whistler, in the nocturnes he began to paint in the 1870s, who paved the way for a less literal, more emotionally based aesthetic. Ralph Albert Blakelock and Albert Pinkham Ryder followed the path set by Whistler and infused the American vision of landscape with new expressive depths, controlled less by the beauty of the wilderness than by its psychic impact. For them, the darkness of the nocturne encouraged a more abstracted approach.

Today, such romanticized subject matter has again found its way into the critical mainstream along with the very act of easel painting itself. In this climate of nostalgia, the nocturne has come to represent a contemporary expression of poetic and introspective visions.

Artists in the 1980s, like their predecessors, often portray the dim regions of the unconscious or provoke dreamlike associations through the medium of the nocturne. In Troy Brauntuch's untitled diptych, the veil of night appears tangible, as though it might be lifted from the surface of the canvas to reveal the features of his figures—a violinist and a soldier—and the terrain they inhabit. His characters are enigmatic; their shadowy domain is not of the real world. Similarly, the nocturnes of Jeff Joyce and Chris Pfister have the ambiguous aura of the dream world. Pfister sometimes introduces figures and animals, but the focus of his untitled painting is a small copse of balloon-shaped trees, dramatically lit by moonlight, at the center of the panel. Their exotic appearance, the dark moodiness of the landscape, and traditional paint handling recall the canvases of Arnold Böcklin, a nineteenth-century Swiss Romantic. Nevertheless, the extremely elongated format and extended areas of blackness that border on abstraction identify Pfister's panel as the work of a contemporary artist. Joyce's *February* is equally evocative of the Romantic spirit but gives fewer clues about its contemporaneity. The blackened foreground and frosty gray sky could have been inspired as easily by a Germanic ideal of moonlit fields as by a recent nocturnal experience, whether real or imagined.

Adapting historical imagery has been a much-publicized trend in contemporary art. But for painters with a romantic focus, the veneer of appropriation does not shield their roiling visions. Unlike other appropriators, these artists are neither dispassionate nor cynical. Joan Nelson's glimpses of sky and trees recall, in their style and coloration, the earlier landscape traditions that the artist acknowledges as her sources of imagery. But the intimate focus and close cropping in works such as her untitled panel reflect not so much her act of appropriation as her desire to draw the viewer into the microcosmic wholeness of her small universe. Mark Innerst's *Avenue* suggests a different source—the early twentieth-century tradition of American modernism. Like the Precisionists who portrayed America's burgeoning new cities, Innerst strives for abstraction. In *Avenue*, geometric shapes that signify skyscrapers and other architectural structures frame a blazing night sky. Innerst's depictions of the urban-industrial landscape confirm the power of the nocturne to transcend the mundane, even when signposts of modern technology are incorporated into the vista.



Edward Ruscha *Plots*, 1986

At the turn of the century, spiritual evocations of technology replaced spiritual evocations of nature. The apotheosis of the industrial landscape, a predominant theme for romantically oriented Precisionists, is now being reinterpreted by artists such as Innerst and Donald Sultan. Sultan's expressively rendered factories and refineries spew their waste with the poetic grace of Whistler's fireworks. But his use of industrial materials such as latex paint, tar, and vinyl tile, and his media-derived imagery—which he dates to indicate when each event took place—locate paintings such as *Poison Nocturne, Jan. 31, 1985* in a contemporary milieu.

Artists in the 1980s also tranfigure the suburban landscape by conceiving it as a nocturne. In moonlight, a swimming pool is no longer an emblem of ostentation, but rather a romantic backdrop for enigmatic events. In Eric Fischl's *Best Western*, an adolescent boy plays a ritualized game with toy cowboys and Indians beside an illuminated pool. Clutching oranges to his chest, he rolls them one at a time over the bodies of miniature figures, who seem to gesticulate in reaction. The game is a strange one, with the illogic of a dream. Fischl's mysterious apparition of adolescence overwhelms the cool, ironic commentary that ordinarily dominates his work. In Robert Greene's sybaritic fantasy *Overnight*, a nude woman languishes in a moonlit pool as her companion and a whimsical assortment of dogs look on. The twin bathhouses in the background are theatrical confections of transparent drapery that resemble fanciful tents. Although Greene's work is stylistically contemporary, his suburban denizens recall the woodland nymphs and naiads of the nineteenth-century Romantics.

The darkened soul, as envisioned by St. John of the Cross, is a concept that well suits the nocturne. If enlightenment is to be achieved through the pain of introspection, the nocturne is a path to that goal. By obfuscating reality, night provokes the extraordinary visions of a preconscious dream—visions that signaled transcendence for the Romantics and a release from binding aesthetic dogma for contemporary painters. Through the nocturne, artists today can reconcile romantic nostalgia with the harshness of modern life to depict worlds both real and imagined, brutal and sublime.

SUSAN LUBOWSKY

Works in the Exhibition

*Dimensions are in inches;
height precedes width.*

Jack Barth (b. 1946)

Felicity, 1984
Oil and charcoal on paper, 72¾ x 59¾
Peder Bonnier, Inc., New York

Jennifer Bartlett (b. 1941)

Night and Day, 1983
Oil on canvas, 84 x 120
Collection of Sue and Steven Antebi

Ross Bleckner (b. 1949)

Tablet, 1985
Oil on canvas, 48 x 40
Collection of Steven Mnuchin;
courtesy Mary Boone Gallery,
New York

Katherine Bowling (b. 1955)

Bench, 1987
Oil on spackle on wood, 48 x 48
Metropolitan Life Insurance
Company, New York

Troy Brauntuch (b. 1954)

Untitled, 1983
Conté crayon on canvas, two parts,
68 x 98 overall
Kent Fine Art, New York

Marina Cappelletto (b. 1953)

Fortress IV, 1985
Oil on plywood, 24½ x 17
Southeast Bank N.A., Miami, Florida

Vija Celmins (b. 1939)

Untitled, 1988
Oil on canvas, 15¾ x 18½
The Edward R. Broida Trust,
Los Angeles

Gregory Crane (b. 1951)

Night of Pines, 1985
Oil and tempera on linen,
36¼ x 56¾
Metropolitan Life Insurance
Company, New York

David Deutsch (b. 1943)

Curved Terrace, 1985
Oil on prepared paper mounted
on canvas, 18 x 84
Locksley Shea Gallery, Minneapolis

Jane Dickson (b. 1952)

Big Oval, 1985
Oilstick on linen, 110 x 68
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York; Arthur Hoppock
Hearn Fund

Eric Fischl (b. 1948)

Best Western, 1985
Oil on canvas, 108 x 78
Speyer Family Collection

Jack Goldstein (b. 1945)

Untitled, 1985
Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 60
Oliver-Hoffmann Collection;
courtesy Josh Baer Gallery,
New York

April Gornik (b. 1953)

One, 1986
Oil on linen, 72 x 98
Collection of the artist; courtesy
Edward Thorp Gallery, New York

Robert Greene (b. 1953)

Overnight, 1985
Oil on masonite, 48 x 39
The Eli Broad Family Foundation

Freya Hansell (b. 1947)

Payoff, 1985
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24
Collection of James A. Folsom

Allen Hansen (b. 1955)

Untitled, 1987
Oil on wood, 48 x 24
Edward Thorp Gallery, New York

Mark Innerst (b. 1957)

Avenue, 1986
Oil on acrylic on board, 35¼ x 29¼
Private collection

Yvonne Jacquette (b. 1934)

Manhattan Nocturne:
Late Evening Traffic, 1988
Oil on canvas, 84⅞ x 69⅞
Private collection; courtesy
Brooke Alexander, New York

Jeff Joyce (b. 1956)

February, 1987
Oil on canvas, 46½ x 60½
Elizabeth McDonald Gallery,
New York

Alex Katz (b. 1927)

Wet Evening, 1986
Oil on canvas, 132 x 132
Marlborough Gallery, Inc.,
New York

Georgia Marsh (b. 1950)

Reflex, 1985
Vinyl gouache on canvas, 82 x 52
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.
Lewis M. Sang

Joan Nelson (b. 1958)

Untitled, 1988
Oil on wood, 24 x 24
Collection of Kathleen and
Irwin Garfield

Chris Pfister (b. 1957)

Untitled, 1988
Oil on wood, 4 x 48¼
Collection of Mark B. Fisher;
courtesy Bess Cutler Gallery,
New York

Edward Ruscha (b. 1937)

Plots, 1986
Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72
Private collection; courtesy Christine
Burgin Gallery, New York

Donald Sultan (b. 1951)

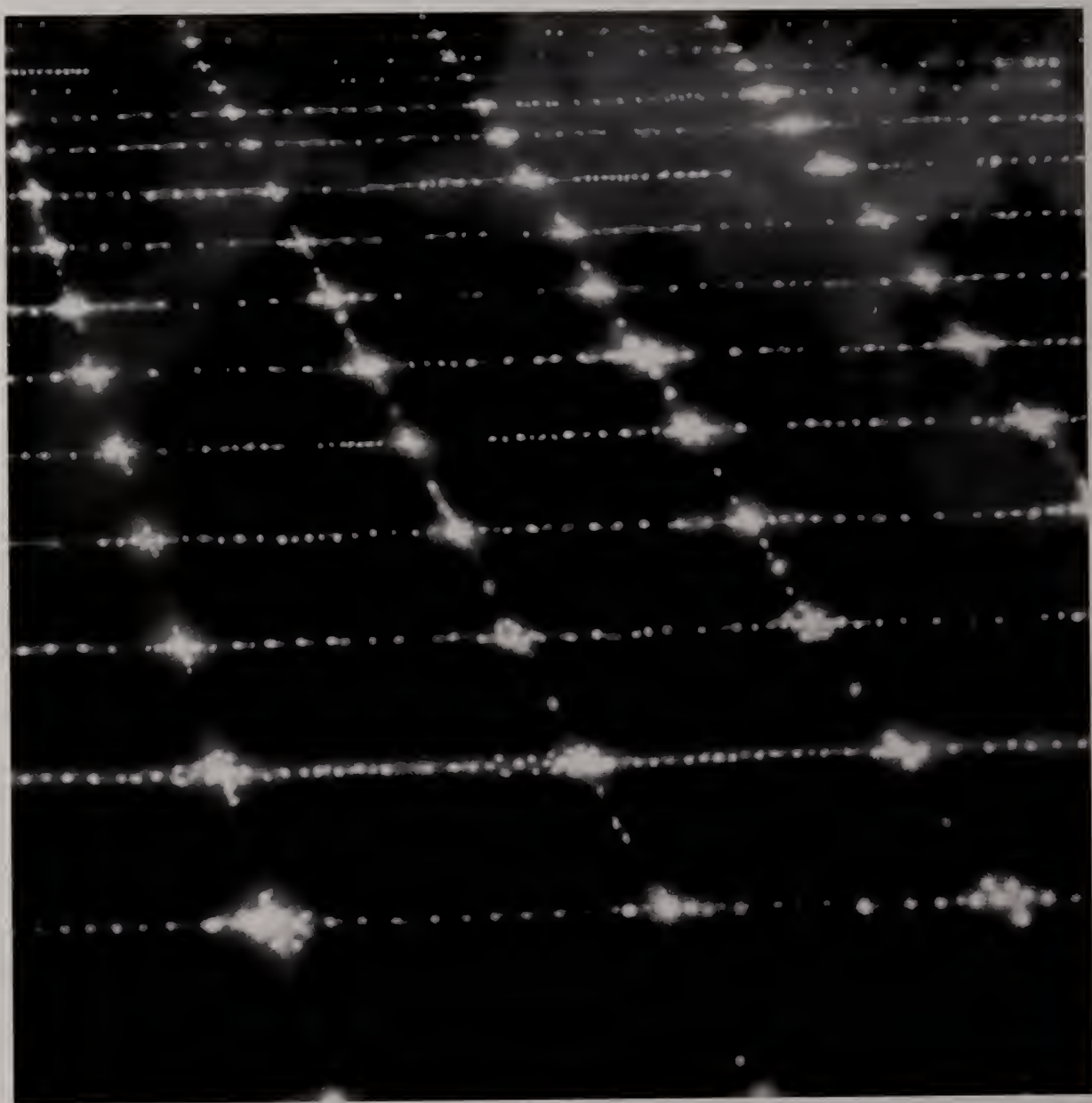
Poison Nocturne, Jan. 31, 1985, 1985
Latex paint and tar on vinyl tile,
96½ x 96½
Private collection

Helen Miranda Wilson (b. 1948)

Full Moon, Newcomb Hollow, 1987
Oil on masonite, 12 x 11
Private collection

Michael Zwack (b. 1949)

History of the World, 1987
Raw pigment and oil on paper,
32 x 50¾
First Bank System, Inc., Minneapolis



Edward Ruscha *Plots*, 1986